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In the last few months of 2012, there has been a considerable amount of furore surrounding the actor Daniel Day-Lewis. Much of this public interest and media attention has been generated with regard, and fervent expectation, to the near release of one the year's most widely anticipated films, Steven Spielberg's 'Lincoln'. As its lead protagonist, Daniel Day-Lewis has received a substantial amount of media coverage and exposure, a great deal of which being specifically directed to the notion of Day-Lewis as a 'star.' *The*

*Telegraph* states, “Daniel Day-Lewis to star in next (post Obama) presidential drama”<sup>1</sup> whereas *LaSalle News Tribune* describes Lewis as “the *star* of Steven Spielberg’s recently released film.”<sup>2</sup> The star is an integral aspect of modernist celebrity culture, with western society gripped by stardom and everything it entails. Yet the term ‘star’ remains an ambiguous and somewhat vague classification, especially when ascribed to film actors. Identifying an individual as a ‘star,’ in a filmic context, often evokes connotations of fame, public notoriety and cinematic

prominence. It is a labelling tool that, when used, reflects a variety of meanings and associations.

Thus, it could be argued that when an actor is identified as a star, it acts to manufacture their identity, building an image through a wide range of constructions. Richard Dyer argues exactly this. For Dyer, a star is a set of meanings associated with a particular individual who is appropriated by specific historical, social and geographical constructions. He suggests that stars are an embodiment of a wide range of social texts, such as 'promotion' and 'criticism and commentary.'

Within this essay I will consider the construction of Day-Lewis as a 'star,' examining how his identity as such is informed by considering both his public and cinematic construction, with a particular reference to his infamous role within the film *Gangs of New York*.

In his work *Stars*, Dyer argued that promotion of the star through media tools was the most "deliberate, direct, intentioned and self conscious"<sup>3</sup> construction of star image. Daniel Day-Lewis has a unique, somewhat complex star image that has been consistently manufactured through several forms of media, such as articles,

interviews and press releases. He is positioned as a highly selective actor with a somewhat distinctive, yet vastly prestigious, extreme style of performance. This is further constructed through his placement as a middle class eccentric, who revels in mystery and ambiguity, rarely giving interviews or allowing public access to his personal life. His star image is also structured through his positioning as the epitome of method acting, an actor with an almost obsessive commitment to detail. This constructed character is assembled through a range of media texts, each acting to inform a certain

image and personality. Day-Lewis is constantly associated with method acting, building a reputation for utter absorption into character. When discussing Day-Lewis in *The Guardian* Vanessa Thorpe notes, “each role Day-Lewis has played since his first success as a gay, fascist, punk in *My Beautiful Laundrette* in 1985 has been trailed with news of his extraordinary attempts to immerse himself in character.”<sup>4</sup> Also writing in *The Guardian*, critic Xan Brooks states, “Day-Lewis is a man who immerses himself so deeply in each role that he appears in perpetual danger of drowning.” Both these

articles build this construction of Day-Lewis as an actor who retreats, somewhat literally, into character. They also act to fuel another image consistently applied to Day-Lewis, that of eccentricity and obsession, often bordering on implying a mental instability.

### Daniel Day Lewis in My Beautiful Launderette

Later in his article, Brooks notes that Day-Lewis is often seen as the “sort of wild, selfish, free spirit who dumps his lovers by fax and vanishes off into the wilderness for years at a stretch.”<sup>6</sup> While written in some irony, this segment from

Brook's article only acts to promote Day-Lewis's enigmatic, slightly neurotic representation within the public and the media. Daniel Day-Lewis's star image is inferred by this reputation of eccentric ambiguity, a trait that is often referred to when discussing his supposedly wild and fiercely secretive personal life. *Wikipedia* is a website used, by millions of people in modern society, as a reference point in accessing information about a star. It offers short, simplified and segmented paragraphs, each building a sense of construction and forming a star's image. Within the first paragraph of



the page it states that Day-Lewis “will remain completely in character, for the duration of the shooting schedule of his films, even to the point of adversely affecting his health.”<sup>7</sup> As it is included in the first paragraph, this element of Day-Lewis’s image is appropriated as an integral aspect of his character. It also assists in shaping the public opinion of Day-Lewis, situating him within a specific package and context of character, which will greatly influence how he is viewed within the public sphere. On his role in *Gangs of New York* it states that “during filming, having been diagnosed with pneumonia,

he refused to wear a warmer coat or to take treatment because it was not in keeping with the period,” further manufacturing his obsessive personality. In 2008, *The Daily Mail* ran an article detailing Day Lewis’s “career with the headline “The VERY strange life of reclusive superstar Daniel Day-Lewis.”<sup>8</sup> This headline from *The Daily Mail* reflects how Daniel Day Lewis is often embodied through the media as one unified star image. It also fuels his representation as a bizarre, peculiar individual, especially through emphasising the “VERY” in the headline.

Another form of promotion that, by Dyer's definition, manipulates the star image is the press interview. He argues that the interview offers a form of construction that can appear more authentic, a personal "privileged access"<sup>9</sup> to the star that gives audiences a sense of identity and meaning. Day-Lewis's interviews only serve to exacerbate his construction as an elusive enigma, with interviewers often directing a barrage of uniformly similar questions that progressively build his star image. In the interview with Brooks, Day-Lewis exclaims that actors "should never give interviews. Once you know

what colour socks they wear, you'll remember it next time you see them performing."<sup>10</sup> This quote informs a certain ambiguity, evoking the sense Day-Lewis is actively avoiding revealing his acting methods for fear they will blemish his performance and tarnish expose the mystery of his character. In an interview with *Time-Out* magazine in 2009, when asked to discuss his methodological acting approach in *Gangs of New York*, he answers with "Ha ha, you will never know."<sup>11</sup> There is a consistent construction of Day-Lewis through these interviews. It could be

argued he challenges Dyer's logic, instead of evoking a sense of "privileged access," Day-Lewis only further disconnects himself from the audience in refusing to discuss either his acting approach or personal life. This is reflected in his interview on the chat show *Parkinson* in 2005. Throughout the entire interview Day-Lewis refuses to discuss *Gangs of New York*, stating "nothing you can say about a film will be make it better or worse." The interview also ends with him apologising for failing to 'reveal' anything, offering only "sorry I haven't clarified anything" as consolation. This is met by

Parkinson's remark of "no... I find it fascinating."<sup>12</sup> The manner in which this interview was conducted only fuels this enigmatic, obscure ideal of Day-Lewis's character.

Moreover, *Parkinson* was also a vastly popular television programme at the time of broadcast. Michael Parkinson's 'fascination' is a reaction that would have evoked a similar response from the audience, of Day-Lewis being 'different,' unique and mysterious; a response that further manufactures his star image, while additionally, building his textual construction.<https://www.youtube.c>

om/embed/0LRdyqS0iS0?  
version=3&rel=1&showsearch=0&  
showinfo=1&iv\_load\_policy=1&fs=  
1&hl=en&autohide=2&wmode=tra  
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Day-Lewis is also constructed, as a star, through his cinematic representation. Day-Lewis gained widespread acclaim for his role as Bill 'The Butcher' Cutting, a ruthless psychopathic crime boss in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century New York in Martin Scorsese's film *Gangs of New York*. Day-Lewis's performance was almost universally lauded, drawing awards from BAFTA and the Screen Actors Guild as well as a nomination for

'Best Actor' at that year's Academy Awards. Rotten Tomatoes also describes Day-Lewis's performance as "electrifying." This critical response is another form of social text that constructs Day-Lewis's star image. Dyer argues this "criticism and commentary" shapes public opinion through generating a certain spectator response to, and experience of, the film. Thus, it assists in constructing a star's image. This critical reaction to Day-Lewis's performance contributes to the notion of him being a prestigious actor, commended and praised by both academics and the public. The



film also serves to fuel Day-Lewis's identity as a somewhat obsessive actor who carries out a complete immersion of character. Reputably Day-Lewis trained as a butcher before the film to enhance his character, it is also believed that he stayed immersed within character throughout the entire film. A *Daily Mail* article encapsulates this notion, claiming that Day-Lewis "first trained as a butcher, and while on set, he listened obsessively to the music of foul-mouthed rapper Eminem in a bid to keep up his level of aggression."<sup>13</sup> This quote from the article goes as far as to construct

Day-Lewis's method acting style performance as hostile, antagonistic or even dangerous. The film also acts to contribute to Day-Lewis construction as an enigmatic, eccentric individual. The film marked Day-Lewis's return to acting after a five year absence, yet his reasons for choosing this particular role for his reappearance have never been widely discussed.

Daniel Day Lewis as Bill the Butcher in Gangs of New York

Dyer argues that star image is a form of structured polysemy. He argues that there are "multiple but finite meanings of effects that a

star image signifies, various elements of signification that may reinforce one another and can also be in opposition or contradict.”<sup>14</sup>

He suggests actors are positioned through “perfect” or “problematic” fit, either they complement their constructed identity or challenge it though performing a contradictory role. Yet as *Gangs of New York* demonstrates, Day-Lewis doesn’t conform to this positioning. His role of Bill the Butcher does challenge his public identity somewhat. His eloquent, softly spoken public demeanour vastly contrasts the menacing brutality of his performance. Yet Dyer implies that

through a star being cast in a “problematic” or contradictory role, they would need a comparative, familiar set of performances or roles that would fit within a “star vehicle.” He describes how “vehicles draw attention to those films that do not fit, that constitute inflections, exceptions to, subversions of the vehicle pattern and the star image.” Yet Day-Lewis doesn’t have any sort of star vehicle, his roles are always great in their disparity. In *Gangs of New York* he is an American criminal butcher, yet before this film he has appeared as a Boxer involved with the IRA and a rebellious Native

American Indian. Thus, it could be argued Day-Lewis defies Dyers classification of star theory through a rejection a star theory. However, this rejection of star theory is very complex, as it also acts to further inform Day-Lewis's star image, through further constructing him as a distinctive, unique actor who doesn't conform to type or association. Dyer confesses to this contradictory nature of star theory, claiming that the "whole star phenomenon is profoundly unstable and the construction can be overwhelmingly contradictory."<sup>15</sup>

The 'star' has become an integral aspect of how audiences experience and conceive both cinema and the individual. It could be argued that star image has taken on even more significance since Dyer first published his work on star theory in the late 1970's. Jill Branston suggests that stars in modern society are constructed across an increasingly wide range of social texts, more than previously thought. She argues that stars are now "appropriated in the wildest, most creative ways by fans on the internet and elsewhere, now possessing an absolute global 'travel' and multiple meanings."<sup>16</sup>

The reasons for contemporary cultures infatuation with the 'star' are debatable, but it has been suggested that it reflects western society's fascination with the individual. Lucy Fischer argues that the star reflects a "projection of social, sexual, and class aspirations, desires and failure, deeply embedded in western cultural conceptions of individualism."<sup>17</sup> Other authors such as Barry King have suggested that we, as the spectator, find comfort in the multiplicity of individual construction. He argues it reflects audience's struggles of achieving a sense of individuality in

the somewhat alienating post-modernist society. He claims the star “epitomises the post-modern self, a de-centred subject, deeply reflexive and disdainful of claims to identity.”<sup>18</sup> I would argue that King’s theoretical analysis reflects Day-Lewis’s construction as a star. His positioning as an enigmatic, mysterious star gives audiences a sense of pleasure. In an age where knowledge and information is so readily available, Day-Lewis offers the audience the unknown, he defies definition. He has a complex identity, such as the ambiguity surrounding his identity as Irish or English. He keeps his personal life



secretive and rejects discussing both his films and acting methods. His roles are also highly intriguing and selective, as reflected in *Gang's of New York*. Thus through challenging classification, Day-Lewis is seen as an unspecified, indefinable star, forever anti-conventional and indescribable.